PHILIPPE PINEL

1745-1826

THE EXPERIMENT AT BICÊTRE: 1793*

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The custom is, in medicine, to point to men rather than to events as immediate causes of progress. However, the classical schoolroom debate on whether the man makes history or history makes the man is still undecided, and the question rises: Is credit due to gentle, amiable Philippe Pinel or to the changes wrought by the French Revolution for the beginning of organized humanitarian treatment of the insane?

The newly established Republican Government had, as one of its problems, the reform of the hospitals. La Rochefoucauld, perhaps more than any other, was instrumental in the adoption of the Decree of Reform, the Commission on which numbered Cabanis and Thouret among its strongest partisans. Both knew Pinel and felt that he was the man for the job, but they succeeded in overcoming his reluctance to accept the position only by appeals to his sense of duty. He was named Doctor of the Infirmaries by decree of August 25, 1793, and took up his duties on September 11 of that year. His first post was at Bicêtre, hospital for the male insane near Paris.

La Maison de Bicêtre originally bore the name of Grange aux Gueux (Den of beggars). Its name is a corruption of the name Winchester, its original owner (about 1284); later (about 1400) it was the property of the Duc de Berry. Under Louis XIII. it was changed to the Commandérie de St. Louis, and as such served as a retreat for disabled soldiers until the building of the Invalides. In 1660, it became a dependency of the Hôpital Général and to it had been brought the insane,—derelicts of a society which had little funds and less insight for their care. Semelaigne's account of conditions prevalent at the time is picturesque:

"In spite of the attempted reform under the most human of all kings the hospitals of the capitol were still in a state of deplorable barbarity. The one which presented the most revolting aspect was La Maison de Bicêtre. Vice, crime, misfortune, infirmities, the most disgusting and repulsive diseases, were all thrown together here. The buildings were uninhabitable, the men lay there covered with mud, in cells of stone, narrow, cold, damp, lacking fresh air and daylight, furnished only with a bed of straw which was rarely changed and which soon became infested; frightful dens in which one would

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have hesitated to put the most vile animals. The lunatics who were thrown into these filthy holes were at the mercy of their attendants, and these attendants were criminals drawn from the prisons. The unfortunate patients were loaded with chains and handcuffed like galley-slaves. Thus delivered without instruction to their guardians they were used as the butt of insulting raillery, or as the subjects of a brutality as ignorant as it was free. The injustice of this cruel treatment filled them with indignation, despair, and rage, put the finishing touches on scattering their wits, and wrung them day and night with cries and shrieks which made even more frightening the noise of their chains. Some, more patient and more artful, showed themselves insensible to so much outrage; but they hid their resentment only to satisfy it better. They watched from the corner of their eyes the movements which their tormentors made, and surprising them in a difficult position, would strike them with their chains over the head or the abdomen and would throw them expiring at their feet. There was ferocity on one hand, murder on the other. Once in this criminal atmosphere, how to change it? What was there to expect from these abominable conditions for the amelioration of mental illness?"

To this place came Philippe Pinel. He was born April 20, 1745, "in the smiling, fertile valley of the ancient Albigensians" at Saint-André d'Alayrac. He was the youngest of seven children. His father and grandfather had been physicians, a profession followed, after digressions, by Philippe and his two brothers. His early education was given him by his mother, who died when he was fifteen. Later the Abbé Gorse taught him French and Latin. At the advice of the Abbé Gorse, Pinel went to Lavaur in preparation for a career in theology. He early displayed scholarly attainments and received minor orders. He remained at Lavaur about four years where he devoted himself to the study "de lettres et de la philosophie"; sciences had no place in the curriculum. In 1767, at the age of 22, he left Lavaur and his preparations for the priesthood, possibly because the iconoclastic philosophy of Voltaire and Rousseau had shaken his original determination. He came to the University of Toulouse where he turned to the study of mathematics and, later, physiology and medicine. He received the degree of Maître des arts, and on December 22, 1773, the degree of Doctor of Medicine.

In 1774, Pinel came to Montpellier where, among others, he came under the influence of Barthez, famous mathematician and metaphysicist; LaMure, eminent and ingenious physiologist; and Gouan, whose courses in zoology and botany were very popular. He supported himself at Montpellier by giving lessons in geometry

and by translating theses into Latin, since he was an excellent Latin scholar. While there he made friends with the brilliant chemist, Chaptal, who, though much younger than himself, was an excellent companion. He also became the friend of Cullen, who had come from the University of Edinburgh and whose excellent thesis Pinel translated. But Paris was Pinel's goal, and with Cullen in 1778 he set out on foot. In Paris Pinel continued to give lessons in mathematics and practiced medicine, the former compensating for the financial deficiencies of the latter. At this same time he seriously considered coming to America. Enthusiasm in France over the newly accomplished colonial independence was high. Pinel had met Franklin at the home of Mme. Helvétius, and could have gained only favorable ideas of America from this gentleman. He deliberated for a long time, but finally decided to remain in Paris. He supplemented his modest income by writing articles for medical journals, and in this way he was soon known to the medical public. The Journal de Physique published many of his papers. In 1784 he became Editor of the Gazette de Santé, a position which he held until 1789. His financial condition improved. "The Journal of which I am in charge," he writes, "assures me of a decent existence without making me dependent on anyone, and renders me as useful as I can be. My life is divided between active occupations and study." Some months later he writes, "All in all, my affairs are going very well here, and I can henceforth give up teaching mathematics. I have several rich patients, and besides I am making translations of English books which bring me enough to live very decently. At the present moment I am translating the "Institutions of Medicine" by Dr. Cullen. My tastes permit me to have a very circumscribed practice, to see few people, and to observe them closely. I would renounce medicine if it were necessary for me to be forever running about in the streets."

At this time Pinel was also writing a summary of the Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London, and his biographer states that in the volume devoted to medicine he ran across the case of a "dormeur" by the name of Samuel Clinton, and that he was very much struck by the strangeness of the case. In 1783 one of Pinel's friends suffered from an attack of mania which Pinel observed very closely. For the next five years Pinel devoted himself to the study of mania, and the application of "remèdes moraux." In the "Pension d'aliénés," a hospital belonging to one Dr. Bel-

homme, "there was born the moral treatment of insanity, little understood by the ancients, whose knowledge did not go beyond empiricism." It was here, apparently, that Pinel found his life's work.

In 1785 there appeared a work which Pinel must have read with interest, the report of Colombier entitled, "Instructions on the manner of managing the insane and of working for their cure in the places set apart for them." "Thousands of insane persons," said Colombier, "are locked up in houses by force, without anyone thinking of administering to them the least remedy; the half-insane are thrown in with those who are entirely so; the excited with the calm; some are chained, others are free in their prisons; finally, unless nature comes to their rescue in curing them the duration of their ills is as long as their days, and unfortunately until then these ills can only increase instead of diminish." Still, nothing had been done. Pinel continued to write articles of psychiatric interest, but the misfortunes of the inmates of the Bicêtre continued. This is easily understood when one considers that France was on the eve of revolution.

Under date of January 21, 1793, Pinel wrote a letter to his brother, Louis, in which he described the execution of Louis XVI., an event which he said filled his heart with sadness and consternation. Though a Liberal, he soon recognized the precariousness of the politics of the day and withdrew from active participation in them to devote himself to his medical practice in and about Paris. He was, at this time, about 48 years of age. For the preceding 15 years he had lived in Paris where his life consisted of a not too busy practice, enjoyable hours spent in the salon of Mme. Helvétius, and in the reading of the works of Montaigne and the ancients. From the writings of Hippocrates, Celsus, Areteus, Galen, Caelius, Aurelianus, and Alexander of Tralle he had become much interested in insanity, and had published a series of essays in the Gazette de Santé on mental problems brought to his attention in his practice. On August 30, 1791, the Royal Society of Medicine, on the eve of its dissolution, had proposed a prize on the question: "The Most Efficacious Means of Treating Diseases in which the Spirit is Alienated before Old Age." Pinel had submitted an essay which bore as epigraph, "gerere se pro cujusque natura necessiarum," from Celsus. Beyond this, the contents of his essay are unknown; the prize, awarded the following year, may or may not have gone to him, since accounts of the tumultuous revolutionary days had no

room to mention this event. This fact, however, is certain; on the prize committee was one Thouret who must have remembered Pinel's work, for it was he and Cabanis (whom Pinel had met at the salon of Mme. Helvétius) who presented Pinel with his great opportunity.

Reform of the hospital meant to Pinel the release of the violent from their chains. But Pinel's hands were tied, for nothing could be done without the authorization of the Central Bureau and the consent of the Commune. These were parlous times, with the Commune jealous of its absolute authority, the law of suspects still in effect, and the September massacres counselling prudence. Pinel was convinced of the urgency of his proposal and appeared repeatedly before the Commune to ask permission to execute it. His perseverance took very real courage since Couthon, President of the Commune, saw traitors everywhere, and suspected Pinel of being an aristocrat. "Unhappy for you," said he, "if you deceive us, and if among your mad you hide enemies of the people." Pinel unemotionally replied that what he spoke was the truth, and that his mission was wholly medical. "We will see," said Couthon, and the next day the fierce cripple had himself taken to the Bicêtre.

Everyone trembled at sight of him, so threatening was the spirit of the man whose body was supported by the arms of his servants. Pinel took him to see the violent insane whom Couthon tried to question. His only answers were curses and insults. Finally, turning to Pinel, he said: "So, citizen, are you crazy yourself to wish to unchain such animals?"

Pinel answered him calmly: "Citizen, I am convinced that these insane are so intractable only because they are deprived of air and liberty."

"Well, do what you like; but I really fear you are the victim of your own idea." Couthon departed, and the sane and insane breathed more freely. That same day Pinel set to work to apply his new treatment.

The first subject was an English captain whose story had been long forgotten for he had been in chains for 40 years. The keepers feared him and approached him with caution since he had killed one of their number with a blow from his manacles. Pinel entered his cell and spoke quietly. "Captain, I will order your chains to be taken off, and will give you liberty to walk in the court if you will promise me to behave well."

"Yes, I promise," said the maniac, "but you are laughing at me; you are all too much afraid of me."

"I have six persons ready to enforce my commands," answered Pinel. "Believe me, then, on my word, I will give you liberty if you put on this straight waistcoat."

The madman, unaccountably calm and docile, submitted to the removal of his heavy irons. The keepers withdrew leaving the cell door open. He tried several times to rise, but he had been chained in a sitting position for so long that he had lost the use of his legs. He finally succeeded in standing, and in tottering to his cell door. He looked at the sky as a discoverer would on a new continent, and walked about all day exclaiming with joy over the simple things in his new world. He spent two more years at Bicêtre, marked by no such fits of fury as had characterized every day of his earlier incarceration, and he even controlled the other patients whom he ruled in his own tyrannical fashion.

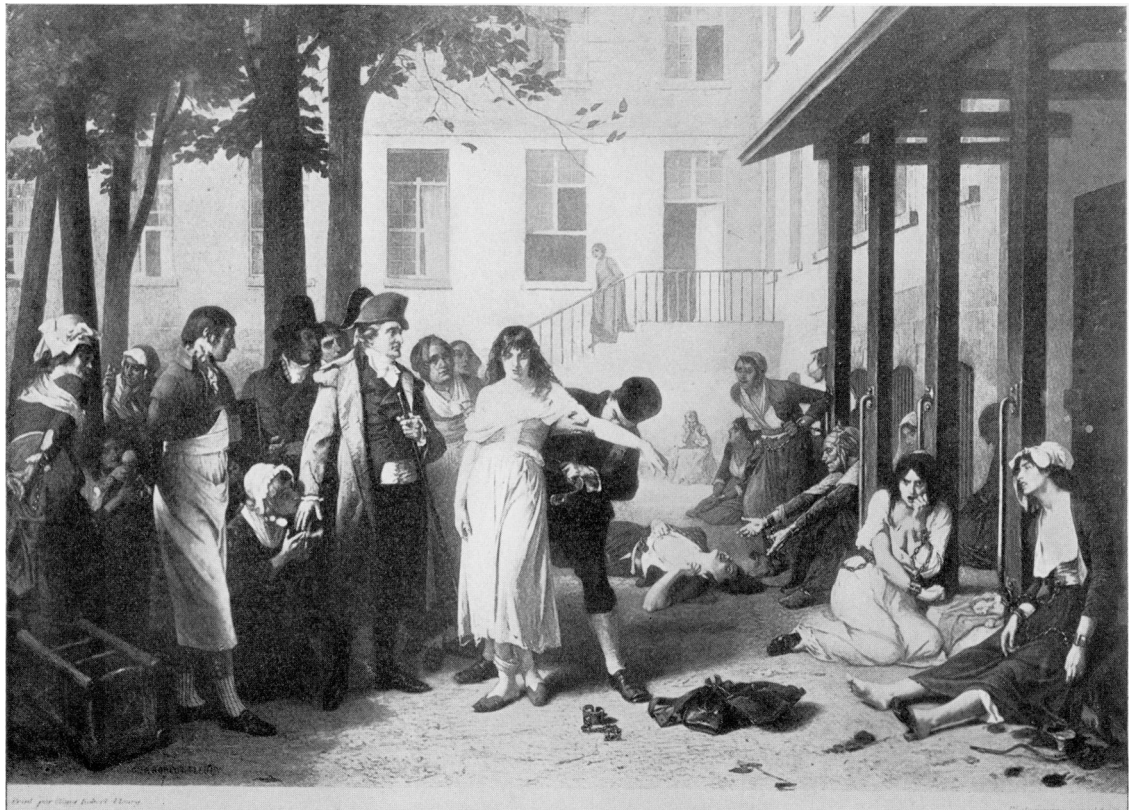
Pinel next approached an author whose literary troubles had weakened his reason. The poor man was terrified at the approach of a new keeper, but once freed ran about in exultation till he fell breathless. A few months later, completely cured, he was sent from the hospital to freedom and Paris. Here he was promptly imprisoned, and perished on the scaffold.

A big soldier of the French Guard, Chévingé, had been in the Bicêtre for six years, since in a fit of drunkenness he had insisted he was a general, and had tried to maintain his claim with his burly fists. He, too, was unchained.

Pinel next approached a dwarfed creature who had been chained for 36 years. He had killed his son, imagining that he was spared by this murder the torments of hell. Pinel's errand of science and mercy came too late, for the old man fell from his chains dead.

Further along was a priest whose chains had never aroused in him the fury that surrounded him. He imagined himself Christ and when asked why he did not break his chains only replied, "It is in vain that you tempt your Saviour." Within ten or eleven months after he was given his freedom his reason was restored.

"In summary," wrote Pinel, "the same insane who, reduced to chains for a long period of years remained in a constant state of fury, walked afterwards quietly with a simple straightjacket and talked to everyone, while formerly one could not approach them without the gravest danger." The new treatment of the insane had been demonstrated, and had proved efficacious. But prejudice is stronger



Pinel à la Salpêtrière

than knowledge, and Pinel had the unhappiness of achieving only incomplete results. The next year he was called to the hospital of La Salpétrière, and many years elapsed before Pinel's reforms held full sway at the Bicêtre.

Pinel's sojourn at the Bicêtre was enlivened by drama of a political nature. Even an insane asylum was not immune to the contagion of the politics of the day. The hospital was already under suspicion for the radical removal of chains. When, time after time, people were found there whose only claim to insanity was suspected sympathy for the Monarchy, the uneasiness of the authorities was increased. The courage of the mild little scientist is even more admirable in this case than in his removal of chains. He could so easily have been made to pay for his temerity with his life, since the suspicions of the Commune were justified. The hospital was a refuge for priests and returned émigrés, whom Pinel, in spite of Republican leanings, did not wish to see slaughtered.

Not only those in authority, but even the bloodthirsty mobs of the street distrusted Pinel intensely. Many times he was followed by shouting crowds demanding proofs of his loyalty. One day a small group of armed men stopped him crying, "À la lanterne!" If it had not been for the intervention of husky old Chévingé, one of the first patients unchained by Pinel, the mob would undoubtedly have executed its threat.

On the 24th Floréal (April 20th to May 19th), in the third year of the Republic (1795), Pinel took over the direction of La Salpétrière Hospital for the female insane. This hospital had been built during the reign of Louis XIII. and was called first the Petit-arsenal and later La Salpétrière (saltpeter works), since the place was used for the manufacture of saltpeter. La Salpétrière, like the hospital of Bicêtre, became in 1660, by a decree of Parlement, an institution for the insane. Since that time it had been supported by royal and popular subscriptions. Here, as at the Bicêtre, Pinel found disorder, confusion, and dreadful living conditions. These women, like the men at Bicêtre, were chained and subject to the worst abuses. Here also, "were chains to be broken, infested cells to be demolished and the entire personnel of the attendants to be replaced. This last reform gave Pinel much trouble because of the weakness of the Central Bureau which again was reluctant to approve so radical a measure. The struggle lasted several years."

The rest of Pinel's life was relatively uneventful. He con-

tinued as Physician-in-chief to the Hospital of La Salpétrière and became Professor of Medicine at the Faculté of Paris until 1822, when he became Honorary Professor.

He was made an honorary member of the Royal Academy of Science, and of almost all the academies in Europe, a Chevalier of the Legion of Honor and of the Order of Saint-Michel. In 1823 he had his first cerebral accident; these recurred periodically, and on October 25, 1826, he died of pneumonia following an attack, at the age of 81.

Pinel's death was followed by sincere and wide-spread mourning among his colleagues and his patients. Great crowds joined in the solemn procession to his grave, where the poor and sick wept while the wise honored his genius and his perseverance.

Of his many works the *Traité Médico-Philosophique,* of which the first edition appeared in 1801, the second in 1809, and his *Nosographie,* a text-book of clinical medicine, which appeared in two volumes in 1798, are the most famous. He had many devoted disciples of whom Esquirol, probably the most famous, always referred to him as "le grand Pinel."

In his writing Pinel acknowledged the debt he owed the psychological exigencies of the Revolution. The passions of all men were greatly increased so that abnormal mental phenomena were more frequent and more easily discerned. At the same time the destruction of so much tradition made Pinel's work of reform seem less radical and more acceptable. Nevertheless, though the interest of the Revolutionists in reform gave Pinel his opportunity, the credit for the procedure in his task is his own.

The philanthropic motive had an important part in directing Pinel's endeavors. He wrote: "The insane, far from being criminals who must be punished, are sick people whose pitiable state deserves all the consideration due to suffering humanity, and whom one must treat by the most simple means to reestablish lost reason."

Pinel's activities, however, had other causes besides benevolence of spirit. He had been sent to the Bicêtre and La Salpétrière to institute reform. Problems of sanitation and administration were very urgent, but they were disregarded in favor of unchaining and observing the insane. One can only conclude that an experimental interest dominated Pinel's work. And surely enough, he found that where formerly patients had been violent or apathetic, in either case unapproachable for purposes of investigation, diagnosis,

and treatment, they now became responsive. Though not until 1840 under Conolly at Hanwell was the straightjacket completely abandoned, the comparative freedom of Pinel's patients made many of them docile and cooperative, and Pinel recorded many cases where causes for illness were discovered and removed. Though treatment was in most cases physic and bloodletting, though cures were probably no more permanent then than now, Pinel deserves enormous credit for reducing the number of violently insane by removing their bonds.

From his writings, particularly his letters to various members of his family, one can make a guess or two concerning those factors in Pinel's personality which account for his magnificent "experiments". Keenly alive to changes in his own emotional state and that of others, always tolerant and continually meditating upon the vagaries of human behavior, he seems to have possessed an almost uncanny ability to evaluate properly apparent disproportion between psychological cause and effect. One feels too that he possessed in extraordinary degree the ability to identify his own personality with that of his unfortunate patients. Feeling their constraint as his own, he could appreciate the probable psychological effect of their release from bondage. It was this insight which, through the experiment at Bicêtre in 1793, initiated the program of modern psychiatric reform.

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